

The future of the workplace

Contributed by Phil Hutchinson, July 2006

Predicting the future of the workplace has become an obsession. But, says Phil Hutchinson, rather like trying to find the solution before we understand the problem, we often fail to catch up with our own predictions before they are superseded by the 'next big thing'.

Some of the predictions for our future workplace from ten years ago - home-working, hot-desking, the regular use of video conferencing, demise of HQs and an increase of satellite offices - have only just begun to materialise now, but often in a slightly different form from the original prophecy.

For example, the term "hot-desking" strikes fear into most office workers. The thought of relinquishing their desk is unthinkable, not because they necessarily require the space to perform their job effectively but because of a basic human instinct to possess our own territory. And of course there is the underlying issue of status that often comes hand in hand with desk/office size. Likewise, home-working has not been as widely adopted as predicted, despite the technology being available for some time.

The issue here is also with the terminology rather than the working method. Flexible working, which encompasses both of these terms, is becoming increasingly common in most sectors and is proven as financially beneficial for the business as well as being popular with employees. To be successful, flexible working methods must be supported and underpinned by a fully integrated interior environment and technological solution. This means total acceptance within an organisation that different tasks require different work settings and actively encouraging the interaction of employees through different styles of space.

An effective communication programme to end-users (staff) is also critical to the success of introducing new working methods. Employees must feel empowered and trusted to choose the best work setting for their task - that may well include working from home for part of the week and, with the increasing portability of technology, working whilst they travel.

So, two popular predictions have not entered the mainstream, "hot-desking" and "home-working"; but what they have done is introduce the idea of flexibility and choice, which has then been applied to best suit their individual requirements. It is this confidence to interpret and forge unique solutions under the umbrella of "flexible working" that suggests this is now a confirmed trend and progress in the workplace has been achieved.

Back to the future For the medium-term we have reached a workable plateau with technology in the workplace. The next few years will be about mainstream adoption of what is available. But there are many other issues, some still technology-driven, that will affect the future of our working environment. Here are a few of them:

Quality and style - consumer wisdom

Although regarded with some cynicism for its frivolous approach in 'serious' architecture and design circles, we have a number of television design programmes to thank for garnering interest and teaching people to consider interior space and how it can affect them. We now have an increasingly interested public that provides a receptive audience for Grand Designs, for example. Inevitably, a heightened consumer awareness of interior surroundings has reached the workplace, and expectations in terms of quality and design are higher. A more knowledgeable client will lead to better and more workable solutions in the future.

Space efficiency

Greater efficiency of space and demand to cut business infrastructure costs will remain a key issue. Space is one of the most tangible and clearly identified assets/costs of any business. Whether this is a one-off saving or a saving that continues year on year will be a key issue, especially where continued evolution of the workplace is anticipated. Timing in relation to disposal opportunities will become more relevant as flexible leasing options increase.

A tiered or layered approach to infrastructure

There is a recognition that buildings will need a far more thorough approach to flexibility within the fabric/structure and services to give building stock a better lifespan. The layered approach may include: site infrastructure, building structure and fabric, services, technology, tenant/business.

Sustainability

With every new building that is built the issue of sustainability and 'green' architecture, quite rightly, moves higher up the agenda. However, the bigger issue that we face is with existing buildings.

Without a doubt, forward-thinking landlords need to upgrade existing buildings in order to keep pace and improve BREEAM ratings to keep up with the standards expected from new builds.

Clients are becoming more aware of green issues and are in a position to place demands upon their landlords. If landlords do not invest now then they face owning less desirable and possibly uninhabitable space in the future.

Location, location, location

Blackberries and similar devices have become the latest must-have in the hierarchy of technology. Coupled with an increase in our confidence in Wi-Fi, it really will be possible to work from anywhere. If applied well with agreed protocols, this will have many advantages - if not - well, see below.

You can run but you can't hide - the backlash of 'invasive technology'

"Why have you not replied to that email/text/voicemail? I know that you have received it." This is becoming a commonplace challenge. There is an increasing expectation that we should reply to emails, anyplace and anytime.

Without introducing new etiquette and protocols to manage the multiple levels of communication that we now all use, we may introduce a new type of paranoia into the workplace. Misinterpreting comments that would be throwaway remarks during a face-to-face conversation suddenly becomes an issue when they are the written word!

Consumers and workers - parallel needs

Twenty years ago major technological breakthroughs were beyond the reach of the vast majority of us, but now production of the latest innovation takes place at breakneck speed and is delivered to the marketplace at an affordable price. We are now in the situation where what is available to us as consumers - coffee, technology, furniture - is often superior to that which is provided for us by our employer.

This schism in standards has led to employees placing greater demands upon their employers which has led in turn to a rise in standards. It is not uncommon to have a coffee franchise in the workplace and well-furnished breakout areas, for example.

What does this mean for the office?The over-riding need for social interaction and the ability to share knowledge with our work colleagues means that the office will never disappear. Ironically, this is compounded by the remote technology we now use more freely, as we begin to realise that it is an enabler to flexible working, rather than the dictator of the way we should work.

Perhaps paradoxically, headquarters will play a more vital role in the lives of employees as they look to the workplace environment to embody the organisations brand values and culture. The role of the designer will be to understand and translate what is unique about an organisation. This is not about applying logos and obediently adhering to corporate colours. It requires a level of understanding that will uncover an organisation's way of life, beyond what it actually does, and translate the true culture into a tangible solution.

The greatest change will not be in the physical design of the workplace in itself, but in recognising and understanding the complex and unique requirements of organisations and expressing this through design solutions. If leveraged by professionals who understand the impact of such complexities, then organisations can and will maximise what their workplace can achieve for the business and the individuals that comprise it.

Phil Hutchinson is Joint Managing Director at BDGworkfutures.